

HERMITAGE MOUND

by Maurice Brooks

There it stands, rounded and symmetrical, on a terrace rising from the Greenbrier River's East Fork. It is ancient -- mature forest trees rise above it. It is man-made, and it represents an incredible effort by people who worked without machinery, wheeled tools, and domestic animals. Earth for the mound was carried by human hands, and it must have had a great purpose.

We shall never know the whole story; mound-building Indians did not leave written records. Even the most careful excavation could yield only fragments of the human motives and dramas behind it. But we can speculate from things which are known.

All through Middle America, but particularly in the valleys of the Ohio and the Mississippi and their tributaries, American Indians began to develop their own social organizations, to cultivate the land, to dwell in villages, and, in course of time, construct earthen mounds. Hundreds of these remain, most of them in the broader river valleys. Some represent an animal -- a serpent or a bird -- and are huge in dimension. Others were rounded; these too sometimes tremendous earthworks such as the famous Grave Creek Mound, near Moundsville, West Virginia. Mounds in this form were used as burial places for the chiefs or other great leaders of the tribe. A few have been carefully excavated by archaeologists; many others have not been studied, although they are under constant threat from vandals and souvenir hunters.

Indians who erected these mounds had given up many of their wandering, hunting habits, and had settled down to cultivate the

land, to grow corn, beans, and squashes, to shape baskets and pottery, to weave cloth, and to form tools and ornaments from copper and its alloys. They were on their way to what the present would call civilization.

But they had neighbors who were more primitive, who resented the settled life of the villages, and who coveted the food, the goods, and the women and children of their more sedentary brethren.

This is an old story, and has been repeated many times. People who have goods and foods have continually paid for their peaceful living by invasion and ravishment from their more warlike neighbors. Some have perished in the struggle; others in all generations have tried to escape by seeking more isolated or protected places. South-western United States is full of the remains of villages which found sanctuary on some isolated mesa or in the shelter of some cave opening. These people have chosen to dwell as hermit bands, as far as possible removed from their enemies.

Perhaps it happened that way in this mountain valley in Pocahontas County. Pressures from invaders may have become unbearable along the lowland rivers, and some hardy band of fugitives may have found this peaceful valley sheltered as it is by lofty mountains. It was far away from neighbors, but not too far; the great north-south Indian trading route that we know as the Seneca Trail, was only a few miles distant.

This hermit band could have thrived here; there was rich soil, abundant water, a great variety of timber, and a wealth of game. In

course of time they may have produced some revered leader, some wise person whose passing was mourned, and whose last resting place seemed particularly worthy of special marking.

So the site may have been chosen, and the labors begun. Handful by handful the earth was carried and the mound erected. When it was finished it was a monument to the hopes and aspirations of an ancient people.

We can only guess, but it is fun to speculate. One fact is beyond dispute; the mound is there. In view of its present circumstances it seems peculiarly fitting that it be known as Hermitage Mound.

~~Maurice Brooks~~